Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction

6 August 2018

English only

2018 Meeting
Geneva, 4-7 December 2018

Meeting of Experts on Cooperation and Assistance, with a Particular Focus on Strengthening Cooperation and Assistance under Article X
Geneva, 7-8 August 2018
Item 5 of the provisional agenda
Review of the report by the Implementation Support Unit (ISU) on the operation of the assistance and cooperation database established by the Seventh Review Conference and renewed by the Eighth Review Conference and consideration of its further operationalization, including measures to further strengthen the operation of the database, including in the light of BWC/MSP/2017/4

Improving the Utility and Functioning of the BWC Assistance and Cooperation Database

Submitted by the United States of America

Summary

In 2017 the Implementation Support Unit comprehensively overhauled the BWC Cooperation and Assistance database, in line with the decision of the Eighth Review Conference. The revamped database promises to be easier to use and more effective in facilitating assistance and cooperation among States Parties, and the numbers of requests and offers have grown substantially in recent years. Nevertheless, a number of challenges continue to limit the effectiveness of the database as a tool to facilitate Article X implementation. This paper describes those challenges and outlines a number of possible measures to improve or supplement the database.

GE.18-12899(E)
1812899

Please recycle

I. The Evolution of the BWC Cooperation and Assistance Database

1. In 2011, the Seventh Review Conference decided to establish a database to facilitate requests for and offers of assistance and cooperation among States Parties. It tasked the Implementation Support Unit to establish and administer the database, to facilitate, upon request, the exchange of information related to offers and requests and any resultant cooperation; and to report annually on the functioning of the database. No financial resources were allocated to this task, however, and as a result, the database established was extremely limited in its functionality – essentially a static webpage with links to the texts of offers and requests. Initially, all offers and requests were restricted to the password-protected portion of the BWC website, accessible only to States Parties (or, more accurately, those representatives of States Parties who had a password). Beginning in 2015, offers of assistance were listed on the publicly-accessible portion of the website; requests, however, continued to be posted exclusively on the password-protected portion of the website.

2. Despite gradual increases in both the number of offers and the number of requests, in 2016 the Eighth Review Conference tasked the ISU, with input from States Parties, to improve the Cooperation and Assistance Database "to make it more user-friendly and comprehensive, and ensure that specific, timely and concrete offers of and requests for cooperation be provided by States Parties in the database." The ISU undertook a number of steps in pursuit of this goal:

- Notifications of new offers are now sent to all States Parties;
- Notifications of new requests are sent to all States Parties who have made offers of assistance;
- With the financial support of a voluntary contribution from Ireland, the ISU transformed the static webpage into an interactive cooperation and assistance database, seeking input from States Parties and then designing a new interface, forms for offers and requests designed to elicit more specific information, and a user guide.

3. Significant progress has been made in promoting the use of the database, as can be seen from the table below:

Trends in the Use of the BWC Cooperation and Assistance Database

Year	*# Requests*	*# Requesting SPs*	*# Offers*	*# Offering SPs*
2012	1	11	11	1
2013	2	23	23	5
2014	2	28	28	5 + 1 group of SPs
2015	4	29	29	5 + 1 group of SPs
2016	19	60	60	7 + 1 group of SPs
2017	31	60	60	9 + 1 group of SPs
2018	41*	8	62**	8 + 1 group of SPs

* 39 active requests
** 60 active offers

4. Despite these positive developments, there are some indicators that suggest that the database is not yet fulfilling its potential:

- Many of the offers and requests have remained in the database for several years, with no clear indication that they have been acted upon.
- Despite the impressive increase in the numbers of offers and requests in the database, it is important to recognize that only a relative handful of States Parties have made use of this tool – as of June 2018, eight States Parties have requested assistance – fewer than one-half of one percent of all States Parties. The proportion of States Parties that have offered assistance is similarly low.

It is important to recognize what these statistics do and do not mean: they tell us something about the database, but do not necessarily tell us very much about the state of actual cooperation and assistance. For example, the lack of information on whether offers or requests have been acted on does not necessarily mean that assistance has not been provided: in some cases, requests are broad and nonspecific, so that assistance that has been provided does not completely "fulfill" the request. In others, assistance has been provided – sometimes by the programs that have offers in the database – but has been channeled through another vehicle, such as the Global Health Security Agenda or the Global Partnership. In still others, the States Parties in question may simply have failed to advise the ISU about their cooperation. Similarly, many States Parties pursue their assistance and cooperation under Article X through very different channels, as is vividly illustrated by Australia's Article X report for 2016-17 (BWC/MSP/2018/MX.1/WP.1). The cooperation and assistance database, then, must be understood as a tool that may be useful in facilitating specific types of assistance and cooperation, rather than a meaningful index of the overall state of international cooperation and assistance, and it should be evaluated with an eye to increasing its impact and utility as part of a wider range of tools.

II. Challenges to Achieving Greater Impact

5. The 2017 ISU Report (BWC/MSP/2017/4) attempted to identify some of the impediments to more effective use of the database, noting that:

> *". . . as recognized by the 2014 Meeting of States Parties, usage of the database by States Parties has been "low". Until recently, few offers or requests had been submitted to the ISU and there are approximately twice the number of offers of assistance than requests. This could partly be a result of the requests for assistance being placed on the restricted area of the BWC website. It has become apparent that some potential requesting States Parties would rather have their needs addressed informally or on a bilateral level, rather than having the information appear in the database. Another challenge is the lack of precision in some requests, which could derive from a lack of structure to the whole process."*

Placing requests on the restricted area of the website reduces their visibility, and thus the likelihood that they will be addressed; however, the ISU's observation suggests that making those requests more public might reduce the willingness of some States Parties to submit them. The ISU's overhaul of the database has sought to increase the precision of offers and requests through the use of a more detailed form that States Parties are requested to complete; to date, however, this does not seem to have resulted in significant improvements in specificity. The lack of clarity with respect to specific needs has been identified as a challenge repeatedly, including in other fora, including the G7 Global Partnership and the UNSCR 1540 Committee, which has emphasized the value of expert visits to States and the development of voluntary national implementation action plans in refining assistance

requests. This mirrors the U.S. experience in peer and implementation review exercises, which have been helpful in identifying specific needs and generating assistance.

6. To these could be added a number of other potential impediments. Based on our experience with inquiries regarding U.S. offers of assistance, it has become clear that offers on the database often do not provide particular information that would be important for an official from a State Party seeking assistance: for example, can individuals affiliated with the State Party apply individually, or is the offer intended to be an element of wider government-to-government cooperation? For training offerings, is funding included, or would applicants be expected to pay for their own travel? Is fluency in a specific language a prerequisite? Is there a specific application deadline?

7. Some of these issues could be addressed through improvements to the database, but others may not lend themselves to straightforward solutions. The database includes offers that are specific and time-limited – and which might lend themselves better to announcements via the ISU newsletter rather than posting on a database where they will rapidly become outdated. It also includes information about large assistance programs which represent major potential sources of assistance, but not "offers" in the traditional sense of that term. It would be challenging to develop an "offer" format that genuinely suits the wide range of assistance found in the database and provides a State Party seeking assistance enough information to clearly assess whether the offer is well aligned with its needs.

8. Finally, a key impediment may be that the BWC Cooperation and Assistance database is simply not the first or most useful resource a State Party might turn to when seeking assistance in most areas, whether the topic is legislation, biosafety/biosecurity, some aspect of public health capacity-building, law-enforcement investigation, or other opportunities. Continued outreach and awareness-raising by the ISU may help, but until and unless the BWC website becomes a significant repository of not only offers but links to valuable references, tools, and resources, it will remain a relatively little-used resource.

III. Some Possible Solutions

9. Paragraphs 27 through 33 of the ISU background paper describe measures that have been taken in other fields to facilitate assistance and cooperation. These should be explored in terms of their potential application in the BWC context. In addition, the following measures could be considered:

10. **Increase the visibility of requests and offers:** States Parties submitting requests should continue to have the option of submitting requests for posting on the restricted website, but should be encouraged to post them on the public website. Increased visibility will increase the chances of mobilizing assistance. Similarly, the ISU should explore ways to increase the visibility of offers, for example by highlighting individual programs or assistance offers on the main BWC webpage or in the monthly newsletter.

11. **Improve the clarity and specificity of offers and requests:** The templates provided by the ISU do not seem to have been widely adopted by States Parties submitting either offers or requests. Where possible, this information should be completed. States offering assistance can improve the database and facilitate the process of finding a match by ensuring the information in the database is current and accurate. All offers of assistance should clearly specify the scope of the assistance offered, time considerations, the process to solicit the assistance, and who can request it (governments, academia, industry, individuals, etc.). States seeking assistance have the equally important responsibility to define clearly the type of assistance needed. Some countries find it difficult to identify and prioritize needs, but well-defined, concrete requests for assistance have better chances of

success. There are no easy, quick, one-size fits-all solutions. Countries need tailored, sustainable, alternatives to build capacity and close those gaps that impede the full implementation of the Convention. The good news is that there are organizations that can assist countries with this particular step of identifying needs, breaking them into smaller, concrete requests for assistance that are easier to meet, thereby increasing their chances of finding a match.

12. **Keep information current:** Offers and requests that have been fulfilled or are no longer available should be removed from the database. States Parties that have submitted offers or requests should review them at least annually to ensure that they remain current and accurate. States Parties should be encouraged to notify the ISU of specific deadlines, grant opportunities, and other time-limited events that are of immediate interest so that they can be posted on the "Latest News" portion of the BWC website and/or included in the newsletter, rather than the database.

13. It is also important—though evidently challenging--for all States Parties offering and receiving assistance to inform the ISU of pertinent developments, including when a request is met. This can include information about what transpired, lessons learned, next steps, and needs that may remain unfulfilled. Having this type of information in the database would demonstrate how the mechanism is working and serve to educate Parties on how to improve their own national processes with a view to future matches.

14. **Expand partnerships and include information about assistance from other sources:** The purview of the BWC goes well beyond the activities of its States Parties. Many of the assistance programs currently available are not undertaken by governments but rather by other actors. Some of these entities have developed innovative and agile programs to provide capacity-building assistance to countries in need of relevant assistance. Unsurprisingly, therefore, BWC intersessional meetings have featured active participation from a wide range of such actors, including experts from the 1540 Committee, the World Health Organization, World Organization for Animal Health, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and numerous NGOs, foundations, and partnership organizations.

15. The relevance of these actors to the BWC is well established and their availability to provide assistance is clear. They have resources, experience, and capacity to help meet long-unfulfilled gaps in States Parties' implementation of the Convention, but their programs are not always explicitly included in the Article X database. An efficient and complete assistance and cooperation process should include offers and programs from these intergovernmental and non-governmental actors. The United States believes it is in the best interest of BWC States Parties to take advantage – to the extent possible - of the expertise, wisdom, and experience of such entities as a way to advance the full implementation of the Convention. Recognizing that the Database belongs to BWC States Parties, we recommend that Parties explore ways to incorporate information about relevant non-governmental programs in the BWC Assistance and Cooperation Database. In addition, the ISU should further develop relationships with such entities to ensure active sharing of information among networks of assistance providers.

16. **Create networking opportunities for assistance providers and experts from States Parties:** No database entry can substitute for the value of an interactive discussion between an assistance provider and those representatives of a State Party best positioned to articulate its needs. Such conversations frequently take place on the margins of BWC meetings, and are occasionally complemented by side events or posters highlighting specific programs or instances of bilateral cooperation, but there is room here for improvement. The Global Partnership, for example, has hosted a number of "matchmaking sessions" in which funders are able to meet with prospective partners – whether countries in need of assistance, or technical assistance providers in search of funding – to exchange

information and explore possible opportunities for cooperation. This and other models should be explored as means of complementing the formal work of MX 1.

17. **Link to useful references, tools, and resources:** Whether the issue is promoting investment and facilitating technology transfer, drafting national implementing legislation, human resource development for public health, laboratory safety and security, research oversight, law enforcement investigation and cooperation, or any of a number of other topics, a wealth of resources, generated by international organizations, BWC States Parties, and others exists: guidelines, reference documents, training materials, online courses, and various other tools. Examples include WHO's laboratory biosafety manual, Interpol's biological crime scene training videos, or the handbook on joint law enforcement/public health investigations published by the U.S. FBI and CDC. These are not offers of assistance, but they are publicly available tools that can be of great value to States Parties. The ISU should be encouraged to include organized information about these resources, with links to the materials, as part of the assistance and cooperation portion of the BWC website. This would greatly enhance the utility of the website for States Parties – and it would also increase the likelihood that States Parties would turn to the BWC website as a resource, including for offers and requests of assistance.

18. **Explore ways to assist States Parties to identify needs and match with sources of assistance:** As noted above, needs identification is critical to effective resource mobilization: it is the step that permits a State Party to clearly articulate its needs, to identify prospective partners, and to formulate a clear and effective request for assistance. Often overlooked is the fact that this is a challenging set of tasks, and one that a database of offers and requests is not particularly suited to addressing. States Parties should investigate possible means of addressing this. It might be possible to draw upon tools such as 1540 or other national action plans, the results of WHO Joint External Evaluations, or other processes, including the findings of peer/implementation reviews. Alternatively, or additionally, it might be possible to establish a voluntary fund to support expert needs assessments. A third approach might be to establish a dedicated post for a Capacity-Building Officer in the ISU, as proposed by the United States at the Eighth Review Conference. Such a position would work closely with States Parties to help them identify gaps in their national systems; to coordinate with assistance providers, be it governments or other entities; and to assist in the allocation of resources where they are most needed.

IV. Conclusions

19. The intersessional program of work adopted by the 2017 Meeting of States Parties gave us the mandate and the responsibility to identify new, efficient, and sustainable ways to strengthen assistance and cooperation under Article X. The adoption of all the modest changes we suggest above would serve to fine tune and greatly facilitate matching requests and offers of assistance. However, new tasks would require new resources. The experience of the BWC Cooperation and Assistance Database thus far illustrates a great deal can be accomplished with a relatively modest investment – but that investment is nonetheless required.